DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 680 RC 016 233

AUTHOR	Toy, Steve
TITLE	School-Community Relations in Small, Rural School Districts: Developing a Plan for a Productive Partnership.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	87
GRANT	400-83-0023
NOTE	124p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CRESS, New Mexico State University, Department 3AP, Box 30001, Las Cruces, NM 88003-0001 ($7.00).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Role; *Board of Education Policy; Communication (Thought Transfer); Community Involvement; Community Support; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Politics of Education; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; *Program Implementation; *Public Relations; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; School Districts; School Support; *Small Schools; Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS	*Administrator Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Addressing the concerns and resources of small, rural school districts, this book sets out a rationale and model plan for school-community relations. After introductory material and a review of what's been done, the first major section lists and describes 10 criteria shown by research to be most important for a small school district community relations program: an evaluation component; someone delegated with specific responsibility for the program; a quality educational program; a planned and systematic program, including goals; needs assessment research; personal good will; honesty; sound media relationships; two-way communications; and enthusiasm. This section is followed by summaries of notable school-community relations practices in 30 school districts throughout the United States. The section begins with a list of 26 notable practices, including newsletters, learning at home projects, and monthly citizen luncheons. The final section proposes a model plan that incorporates the 10 criteria for success that were defined at the outset. Ten steps are proposed for implementing the plan: develop board policies; do needs assessment research; correct existing deficiencies in the educational program; set internal and external goals; give honesty priority; give personal good will and enthusiasm priority; plan the actual program; plan the methods of communication; execute the program; and evaluate the success of the program. (JHZ)

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN SMALL, RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

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DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR A PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIP

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SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN SMALL, RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR A PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIP

By

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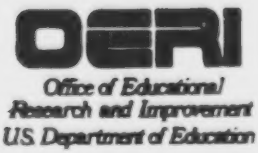
1987

Published by
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)
Clearinghouse on Rural Education
and Small Schools (CRESS)
New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003-0001



This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. NIE-400-83-0023. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

Cover design by Debbie Guerrero.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am sincerely grateful for the cooperation of many who have assisted me in attaining the knowledge and skills necessary for the completion of this project.

I am most appreciative to Dr. Mike Martin and Dr. James Rose, both of the University of Colorado, Boulder, for their wisdom, counsel, and patience when I was working on my dissertation in this area.

I also extend gratitude to the Shelley Joint School District No. 60 Board of Trustees for allowing me the freedom and time to develop this monograph.

Steve Toy

TV Reviews

I thought I had a pretty decent school-community relations plan going.

Then I started my film-reviewing career on a local television station.

A bit of background first. Education is my second career. Prior to entering the field of education, I worked in journalism for a number of years, including employment as a critic and reporter for Variety, the show business newspaper. When I went into education, I rose through the usual ranks from teacher to principal to superintendent.

I have found that my journalism background has been invaluable to me as I have worked in administration. I have also enjoyed the opportunity to maintain some involvement in writing--often school-related, but occasionally not.

That's where the film-reviewing comes in. A local television station was doing a feature on our school district; as part of the story, the reporter noted that I used to be a film critic. Like Lana Turner on the soda fountain stool, I had been discovered!

I received a phone call from the general manager of the television station asking me to serve as their film critic, appearing twice a week. It sounded like a kick, and I said yes. Of course, I first checked with my board chairman to make sure it would not be interpreted as a conflict of interest. He, and other board members, indicated they felt good about the endeavor.

I started the reviews. The first week on the air I mentioned something about Mel Gibson being sexy and wearing his underwear in his starring role in "The River."

That did it. The phone calls started. Why would a superintendent of schools use the word "sexy"? Who cares about Mel Gibson's underwear?

I carried forth undaunted. A few weeks later I reviewed the film, "The Killing Fields," and recommended it heartily. It was rated R. Then I reviewed the film, "Witness," and also recommended it. It, too, was rated R.

The phone calls became violent--and not just to me, but to board members as well.

I forgot to mention--I work in the Shelley School District, Shelley, Idaho. Shelley is a very conservative community, with a strong church influence. Because my family is also somewhat conservative, Shelley's high values and standards were attractive to us. In fact, that's the reason we moved there and accepted the superintendency.

Well, my R-rated movie reviews and Shelley's conservativism did not go very well together at all.

"The superintendent is telling our children to go see R-rated movies, when we've been teaching them not to."

"What kind of superintendent do we have, anyway?"

When I got a letter from a local church leader, I knew I was in trouble.

And I also knew I had made a mistake. Shelley is a conservative community, and I should not have been reviewing R-rated movies in such an area. Granted, many PG movies have more inappropriate content than R films--but that was beside the point. Folks here were teaching in church that R-rated movies should not be seen, and I needed to promote that standard.

As I said, I thought I had a pretty decent community relations program in operation. And there I sat, watching it all go down the tube--right before my eyes.

I had no choice but to confront the issue head-on, in a very direct, honest, and candid fashion. Fortunately, I had that community relations program going. The value of such a program is that it provides a foundation of fine relations when a crisis comes up.

Part of my program involves writing a weekly column for the local newspaper--an excellent outlet for me to correct misunderstandings or get out information. I wrote a column for the

paper explaining my error in judgment in choosing to review R-rated films, and indicating that I would cease and desist from that point on.

That did it. The phone calls stopped. The letters stopped. The crisis was over.

There are two things to be learned about school-community relations from this somewhat agonizing incident:

First, a school-community relations program cannot be established on the spot, in a moment of crisis. If I hadn't already established a weekly newspaper column, I would not have had a forum to use to get myself out of the jam I was in. The newspaper would have been very hesitant to give me space that week just so I could explain away my R-rated film reviews.

Also, if I hadn't worked hard to establish a feeling of trust between the school board, the community, and me, who would have believed me when I did provide an explanation?

Second, school-community relations does not mean glossing over, or hiding, your mistakes. It does mean having a direct and honest relationship with your community. I was wrong, and I needed to quickly admit I was wrong and, yes, correct the error of my ways.

Quality Communication

> One of the worst problems is lack of communication...Leads to duplication... No feedback on cases. Teacher's low man on the totem pole when it comes to

being informed about what the other groups do (comment from an elementary school teacher quoted in Educational Disadvantage in New Hampshire, 1975).

Three years after resigning from office, a former president of the United States writes his memoirs. Admitting that he had misled the American people about his participation in the Watergate cover-up, Richard M. Nixon says that his actions were the result of a series of misjudgments and tactical errors. He describes his early reaction to Watergate in the following words: "I felt sure that it was just a public relations problem that only needed a public relations solution" (Simon, 1980, p. 5).

Whether in politics or education, quality communication within an organization and between the organization and its varied publics is critical to success in accomplishing organizational goals.

Public relations practice can be traced back to early colonial days (Cutlip & Center, 1964). Public relations concepts have been used in school districts for a major portion of this century and were discussed by Moehlman as early as 1927. The practice of such techniques in the schools has developed increased sophistication through the years as a result of media advancements, and increased demands placed on schools for community involvement have resulted in more sophisticated use of public relations practice (Simon, 1980).

Major efforts in school public relations have been traditionally tied to budgets that can support such efforts. Since larger and more affluent schools are better able to hire specialized personnel, public relations programs have been more pronounced in urban or suburban school districts than in small, rural districts.

Efforts on rural levels have been informal and often nonexistent. Rural school district boards and administrators may explain their lack of public relations efforts as being due to declining revenues, but that explanation may be a rationalization. Lack of personnel skilled in public relations practice may be the major cause of minimal public relations efforts, as, according to Simon (1980), many public relations practices are virtually cost-free, requiring only skill and knowledge. If provided with a program adaptable to their districts, administrators themselves could carry out a public relations program. Forms, procedures, and plans are available for small districts, but few districts take advantage of them.

A Plan

This guide is designed to present an easy-to-use plan for school-community relations in small, rural school districts. The plan being presented is based on research which has developed the standards against which a school-community relations program for small school districts can be measured. Many small, rural school districts have been studied, and recognized strengths of their school-community relations efforts have been noted for inclusion in this plan.

The plan includes the development of policies and regulations, research, the correction of deficiencies first, the setting of goals and objectives, honesty, internal relationships, external relationships, the maintaining of media relationships, personal good will and enthusiasm, and evaluation.

Again, this plan does not necessarily carry a high price tag. I developed and modeled this plan while working in Lone Star School District 101 in northeast Colorado. Our entire school district population was 70 students. That's not a misprint--70. Frankly, if we could do it, you could do it. We had very little staff--I was superintendent and principal, as well as occasional janitor. We had no budget for community relations. But we made it work.

School-community relations is not a frill or luxury that can be ignored (J. J. Jones, 1966). In fact, some states mandate aspects of school district public relations. For example, in Colorado accountability legislation has mandated involvement between the school and community.

Many rural school district problems stem from communications issues which disrupt the educational process (Wherry, 1978). It therefore becomes imperative for small, rural school administrators to place a priority on school-community relations and to develop a school-community relations plan.

How often have your curriculum plans gathered dust on your desk because you were busy trying to resolve a conflict between a bus driver and a few parents? How often have you

wished you would have more time to work with a poor teacher on instructional improvement, only to find that most of your day is spent on the phone with irate parents?

School-community relations doesn't take time. It saves time.

"We have lots of school districts which fit into the criteria of being small, rural school districts," wrote Helen Williams, Public Information Officer for the State of Idaho Department of Education, "but none of them has specific public relations programs" (Williams, 1982). The entire state of Idaho, with numerous rural school districts, contains no small school public relations programs. The need exists for a plan adaptable to such schools.

Williams continued:

> Ours is a geographically large, sparsely populated state, and poor economically. As you perhaps may know, Idaho ranks at the bottom in school funding. For this reason, school district public relations programs are practically non-existent. (Williams, 1982).

Hugh Harlan, Administrator, Instructional Services Branch, Nebraska Department of Education, noted that several Nebraska school districts have public information departments, "However, I would not consider them to be excellent...They do have adequate public relations programs" (Harlan, 1982).

Paul Fillion, Chief, Division of Administration, State of New Hampshire Department of Education, noted that "If there is any real public relations program at all" in districts of less than 1,500 students, "it seems likely that it is both unusual and creative" (Fillion, 1982).

Leland Burningham, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Utah State Office of Education, explained that the smaller school districts in his state "tend to conduct their public relations activities on an informal basis as needs arise without an official program or spokesperson other than the local school district's superintendent (Burningham, 1982).

Virginia M. Ross, Director of School Communication Services and Public Relations, National School Public Relations Association, expressed interest in improved small school community relations, commenting, "All too little has been done for the rural schools" (Ross, 1982).

It becomes apparent that while community relations--and school-community relations in particular--have been extensively researched and developed, little in this field has been specifically directed toward the small, rural school district.

You're sitting in your office, quietly reading the latest ERIC publication, when an obviously-perturbed senior citizen arrives to discuss your buses.

Why, the patron wants to know, are buses seen passing by the house all day long? Don't

the kids ever stay in school and learn how to read? And who do you think is paying for all these field trips, anyway?

You're on your twelfth sharp pencil as you try to balance next year's budget. You finally concede it's all but impossible, and recommend to the board that it seek a tax increase. They agree and off to the polls you all go. The issue is defeated by a wide margin, hurting your credibility considerably, not to mention your pride.

At first glance, it might be tempting to deal with what you conclude are transportation and financial issues. But if you look closer, you might find that the biggest issue your district is facing is communications problems.

Communications issues are, indeed, at the heart of a large percentage of a school administrator's problems. In small schools, the problems are accentuated even more. I have seen myself excel when my communications were in place or go down to defeat over school-community relations issues. What is worse, I have watched my colleagues literally run out of town on their educational rails because of school-community relations problems.

Granted, large districts as well as small experience such crisis, but it is hard to match the petty politics and back-fence gossip which surround small schools. Sure, you can ignore it. But it won't go away, and it will eventually do you in--unless you have a plan.

NSPRA

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) has been very active in encouraging districts toward the development of school-community relations programs. NSPRA has recommended establishing a governance body of parents, counselors, teachers and teachers' aides to set mutual goals and directions. It suggested that educators meet with parents and citizens in churches and other community centers, and also recommended talking with parents in their homes about important issues or new plans (National School Public Relations Association [NSPRA], 1981).

The Association has made the following suggestions for a school-community relations program (NSPRA, 1980):

--gain support of the school board

--assign someone to full or part-time responsibility--superintendent, administrator, teacher or lay person volunteer

--use a three-pronged approach: internal, (within school, faculty and staff), external, (residents within school district area); external, (outside of school district)

--set up a program of "what to do" newsletters and media releases

--encourage staff to become school-community relations conscious, emphasizing that they must "tell it like it is," and not use smoke screens

--have an ongoing program, not a crisis-to-crisis approach

--encourage staff members to be an active integral part of the community

--be certain schools are available for community use and provide programs for all age groups, preschool to senior citizens

--leave favorable images as a result of your recruiting campaigns

--work closely with the media

NSPRA has suggested beginning with a public opinion poll. This can be followed by a statement of goals and a statement of research pertaining to the goals, a statement of school district reorientation that must be accomplished in light of the research and new goals, a definition of the strategy to be used in accomplishing the goals, and the timing of the tactics to accomplish the goals (NSPRA, 1978).

Plan Ideas

G. Marx (1982) suggested the school-community relations process must be based upon openness and honesty. A planned process for

communication, a systematic or continuous process for two-way communication, strategy development, issues management and counsel, and interpersonal communication are elements that should be included.

Banach (1982) encouraged communications audits to provide a solid foundation for school public relations programs. Such an audit allows districts to assess communication needs. An audit takes into consideration the type of community, the special characteristics of the schools, and the types of internal and external communications that are most likely to be effective.

Rist (1982) addressed herself specifically to the importance of newsletters. They should not, it is emphasized, be the system's sole communications tool, but should be part of a larger program, including face-to-face, written, and audiovisual communications. But they can, Rist indicated, be the solid core of an effective communications program.

Addressing himself to good press relations, Marx (1982) offered these suggestions:

--meet with news representatives

--develop attractive news release and public service forms

--be non-defensive

--respond promptly to reporter calls

--assist reporters in covering stories

--be aware of deadlines

--avoid educational jargon

--round off complex numbers and figures

--do not keep things "off the record"

--hold few news conferences and only when warranted

--do not ask a reporter to see a story before it is published

--set up a good internal reporting system

--establish a communications advisory group including news media representatives

--never say "no comment"

--say "thank you" to reporters that have done a good job

Elsie Clapp (1982) maintained that school-community relations should be so effective that the school urgently attempts to meet the needs of its community. There should be no distinction between life in school and life outside school. The school, she maintained, becomes the converging point of living and learning in the community.

A school-community relations program should inform, gain opinions, and involve, according to Mooney (1980). To do that, a division of responsibilities is necessary.

Board of education responsibilities should include:

--input of ideas

--moral and fiscal support

--board meetings

--attitude toward the public

--community involvement

--published budget

--bond issue campaigns

--special reports

--newsletters

--advisory committees

--surveys and questionnaires

Superintendent and staff responsibilities should include:

--organizing and implementing a school-community relations program

--coordinating input of the board

--securing support of the board

--curriculum logistics

--personnel program

--involvement of staff, pupils, and publics

--friendly office

--hiring practices

--orientation of new teachers

--press relations

--reports

--yearly calendar for the public

--calendar for the staff

--curriculum exchange bulletin

--overall community relations

Responsibilities of principals and other building administrators should include:

--leadership in organizing the school for an effective school-community relations program

--school atmosphere, school appearance, school curriculum

--co-curricular program

--involvement of faculty, students, parents and community

--logistics

--friendly office

--telephone decorum

--welcome to visitors

--welcome leaflet

--orientation of new parents

--inservice for parents

--inservice for teachers

--school-wide meetings

--handbook

--student handbook

--staff handbooks

--weekly calendar

--newsletters

--letters to parents

--letters to staff

--parent publications

Teachers' responsibilities should include:

--classroom atmosphere

--classroom teaching

--rapport with students, staff and parents

--home assignments

--report cards

--notes to the home

--happygrams

--art work

--parent conferences

--home visits

--parent involvement

--open house

--parent meetings

--community work

--class projects

--field trips

--student guidance

--welcoming new students and parents

Students' responsibilities should include:

--actions at home and in the community

--attitudes and opinions expressed at home and in the community

--success after high school graduation

Responsibilities for the school's various publics in the school-community relations program include (Mooney, 1980):

--being informed from reliable sources

--offering constructive opinions of the schools

--becoming involved in planning for the schools

--offering moral and fiscal support of the schools

Swedmark (1979) asserted that in order to operate a good school public relations program, it is necessary to be knowledgeable in the broad field of public relations, to have the ability to implement staff relations and to be able to interpret the role of administration in the public relations field. Exhibits can be used to promote public relations within the community and perhaps with professional organizations. Above all, training is very important for good public relations between school and community.

In order to maintain good public relations between school and community, Parker (1978) believed that it is necessary to find out what the community knows and thinks about its school. Then it is possible to establish public relations priorities and develop plans to implement them. A school district public information officer should be appointed who can determine what information needs to be disseminated to various parts of the community. The story of the schools can be made available to the public through various media--newspapers,

exhibits, etc. Above all, the school district must listen to the community concerning its needs and thoughts. According to Parker, the media should be handled with care.

When schools and the public fail to communicate adequately, "problems are bound to arise, lack of understanding is nurtured and attitudes of mistrust are fostered" (Walling, 1979, p. 194).

Selling Schools

Martorello (1982) noted that it is time teachers and others started "selling" their schools. Paddock (1981) explained that principals must determine what the critical components of a school public relations program are--and how they can best be managed--since time is a scarce commodity.

Wherry (1981) suggested avoiding development of community relations activities solely from the perspective of keeping the public informed, as opposed to activities which enlist parental input and voluntary physical support. He noted that a comprehensive community relations program enlists support from community members who are powerful, visible and organized; those that have power and organization but little visibility (like people with money); those with organization and visibility but little money (like PTA); and disenfranchised groups like minorities and the economically deprived.

The shielding of educational and sociological issues that confront the schools out of fear of public reaction "is a mistake,"

according to Sikula (1981). "It is far more productive to keep the public informed, accept community input, and avoid the misconceptions and accusations which arise from a concerned but ill-informed school community."

Results of a survey of secondary administrators in Indiana showed that 80 percent of school boards were supportive of strong school-community relations, but only 25 percent reported expenditures for public relations in their budgets (Caress, 1979).

Austin (1980) discussed the need for specific school departments to maintain public relations efforts, and commented on work in Lincoln, Nebraska between the physical education department and the community where a new physical fitness report was developed and reported.

Occasionally efforts to promote public understanding can go overboard. This is often evident at board meetings that have too much public participation, as Hogan noted (1981). She explained that if board meetings are to be conducted efficiently and fairly, time must be allotted for questions or comments from the public, but such public participation should be subject to rigorous standards of preparation and limited discussion.

Embellishing the importance of the teacher role in a public relations program, Baughman (1982) suggested that teachers should: show courtesy and genuine pleasure toward all visitors; actively participate in parent-teacher organizations and other community affairs; seek, through invitation, use of the community's human

resources both in curriculum planning and in instruction; and emphasize the unique value of citizen contributions.

Probably one of the most simplistic, yet possibly most effective, public relations ideas is reported in "What's A Good PR Technique?" (1981)--an idea tried by Richard A. Fuchs of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Fuchs suggested looking to the needs of the children in classes and meeting those needs. "Look to the kid who has never experienced success and find a way for that student to become a winner," Fuchs noted. "In losing yourself in your students, you will find that public relations will take care of itself--through your students."

NSPRA (1981) noted the critical need for good school-community relations in small schools. A 1982 NSPRA report noted the efforts of Condon Administrative District #25 in Oregon, where constant use of school facilities and strong adult education programs contributed to solid school-community relations.

According to Edington (1976), if the small rural school is to achieve lasting change, it is very important that the community be involved in the decision-making process affecting change. He suggested several means of increasing community involvement:

--preparing informational publications

--implementing the community education concept

--including parents of minority children

--coordinating public agency services with school services

As noted in Wilson (1982), there are several dilemmas in school-community relations that are peculiar to rural school principals:

--school boards and administrators are fearful of losing control

--others impose control over the principal's time

--there is a need to be all things to all people

--there is difficulty in defining the principal's role in community development

--there is difficulty in determining what the teaching staff's positions are on community involvement

NSPRA (1978, p. 198) assured that "small school districts need PR, too," and noted that "with the proper commitment, it can be done on a limited budget. And it definitely brings results." A three pronged-approach is suggested that targets efforts toward:

--internal (within school) for faculty and staff

--external for residents within the school district parameter

--external for outside of the school district (recruiting)

Maintaining that support for existing school programs by the community is an on-going process, Chase (1978) suggested that the community be made aware of the successes that the school is having, as well as the steps that are being taken to solve the problems, through such tools as newsletters, news articles, and personal contact in a community-school day. During the community-school day teachers and students might present a program to the community describing some of the activities happening at school.

In 1980 NSPRA asserted that a small school-community relations program must begin with quality instruction, be personal and continuous, appeal to the "person on the street" without ignoring the many other publics of a school district, promote a "we care" attitude, listen to the people, and be regularly examined and expanded to meet the needs of the community.

Rural Interaction High

A 1981 study showed school-community interaction in small, rural schools to be high. Some 84 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "People from the community take an interest in what their children are learning, but they do not take an active part in curricular decisions." Some 63.4 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "People from the community talk to school board members about curriculum and depend on the school board and administrators to implement the community's will." Some 56.1 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "People from the community talk to teachers and administration directly to

recommend subjects which they think should be taught" (Dunne & Carlsen, 1981).

Findings from a study by Seifert and Hefner (1981) of smaller Texas schools suggested a dichotomy between thought and action concerning small school public relations. While chief school administrators stated that the public relations function is important, this was not reflected in the amount of money budgeted for and the priority placed on public relations.

Nachtigal (1980) noted that rural schools and rural communities operate as a single, integrated social structure, and that any improvement efforts in rural schools must be based on the reality of rural circumstances. Improvement efforts must include problem defining, planning and implementing at the local level, and must incorporate assistance from professionals and agencies outside the community.

The National Institute of Education's Conference on Rural Education: Capacity for Problem Solving (1977) concluded that face-to-face interaction is the most common and effective way in which ideas are conveyed and information is shared in rural school districts--people generally rely on others whom they know and trust for information and ideas. This conclusion has impact on small rural school communicators who may be searching for the most appropriate communication technique.

A method of communication in a small, rural school is the concept of the "family school," where parents are looked on as partners in the

education of young people, noted Barone (1980). This results, he said, in ease of communication among administrators, teachers, parents and students.

R. D. Jones (1978) addressed himself specifically to vocational agriculture programs existing in small schools, noting that "public relations for vocational agriculture programs are an obvious and essential function" (p. 136). He explained that the day-to-day responsibilities for public relations fall on the teacher of agriculture.

Bringing the subject of public relations in small schools to the field of home economics, Griggs (1979) noted that many home economists feel "our profession has an image problem." She suggested home economics teachers organize and initiate a public relations program "that will nurture understanding and support for home economics from students, other teachers, parents, administrators and the community at large" (Griggs, 1979, p. 44). Such a program should contain three aspects: publicity or information-giving, interpretation, and interaction.

Extending personal invitations to the public to attend curriculum fairs, exhibits, back to school nights, and other school affairs can promote good school-community relations (Brunner, 1981). Because career days are an aid to students, public relations are enhanced. Brunner also suggested that parent-teacher conferences be scheduled with convenience to the parent in mind. He noted that the school could be used for community functions and activities, thus acquainting the entire community with the

facilities. Other suggestions by Brunner include using a community resource file, community volunteers, school newsletters and parent-principal interchanges.

Reporting on four case studies that considered specific techniques to build citizen participation in a community education program, Druian (1977) cautioned that citizen participation doesn't come about by following a recipe. An approach or technique that works in one community may not work in another until a process of adaption has taken place.

One of the case studies reported by Druian concerned a rural school district, San Juan County, Utah. The model of citizen involvement was the Rural Futures Development Strategy (RFD), a program which was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory of Portland, Oregon. The RFD strategy called for establishment of a representative group composed of district citizens, school staff, and students (where appropriate). A team of process facilitators worked with the school-community group to develop the skills of systematic problem-solving, effective functioning, and collaborating with other groups. The study concluded that a measurably positive impact on community involvement, communication, and openness had been attained, and that the benefits of community involvement as they resulted in San Juan County would have been difficult to achieve using other procedures.

May (n.d.) considered community involvement as it can be used in a career education program in rural Appalachia. She defined community involvement in rural Appalachia as:

> ...soliciting the expertise of local resource people, business and industry personnel, community leaders and parents, and affording them an opportunity to share with students their knowledge of work skills, academic skills, and adaptability skills that are indispensable to life (p. 2).

She suggested forming an advisory council as the key to the program. Goals should be set and commitments should be obtained, she noted. Visitations should be made by advisory council members to teachers, parents, business and professional persons. Orientation sessions should be held in the school and throughout the community.

A Checklist

Di Benedetto and Wilson (1982) provided a checklist for principals and their school-community relations involvement:

--review board/central administration policies concerning community involvement

--organize annual school plan

--prioritize improvement efforts with citizen input

--organize citizen, faculty and administration team to review community involvement needs

--gear parent programs to needs of different student groups, including parenting courses

--citizen volunteer program

--senior citizen program

--student council projects on community involvement

--inform persons living near the school of school events

--survey parents and citizens

--have informal breakfasts, rap sessions and tours of the school

--create community school for adult education and recreation

--coordinate public relations program to community needs for information

--review publication needs and effectiveness of them

--survey staff memberships in service clubs

--identify opinion leaders through nominations of faculty, citizens' council members, etc.

--identify and make contact with youth-serving groups of the community

--invite service clubs, ministerial groups, etc., to meet in the school

--check on mandated councils for compliance, membership, functions

--review policy regarding students' performances and services to community groups

--review with staff policy for disclosing information for news releases

In-depth interviews with 30 administrators allowed Cusick and Peters (1977) to examine the role of the secondary principal in small towns based on the principals' own perceptions. They concluded that there are two major norms that shape the principal's role in small towns--the principal should embody the ethic of a totally responsible public servant, and the principal should monitor the diverse elements of the school to ensure community acceptability and organizational stability.

The study reported that principals considered themselves to be in a "very restrictive" environment wherein the school was under constant surveillance by a warm and demanding public. Their lives, the data showed, were almost totally public. They were always on call, were susceptible to myriad communal demands, and were expected to literally embody the highest aspirations that the community held for its schools.

Home Visits

The home-school visit is a useful tool in a small, rural school community relations plan (Newhouse, 1980). A visit to the home by a teacher early in the school year can begin a

process of cooperation and understanding. The home visits demonstrate the willingness by the teacher to meet the parents on "home ground." Many times, Newhouse explained, a trip to the school is difficult for the parents, particularly if they have had a poor experience in school themselves, or feel that their child is doing poorly and will be criticized. Many parents, he noted, are not as educated as the teacher and feel inferior; a conference with the teacher at school can be a threatening experience for them.

Newhouse (1980) offered five suggestions for the teacher making the home visit. The teacher must:

--have an accepting attitude toward any home situation which is encountered

--be as positive as possible

--keep the visit brief (10 to 15 minutes)

--have good questioning skills

--be a good listener

Widespread Concern

Concern in recent years for the maintenance and development of the small, rural school has increased, along with a recognition of the need for better communications and community relations in small school districts. Reflecting this increased concern, a number of community relations experiments and studies have been conducted in rural areas around the country.

Duncan (1981) documented agricultural, social and educational change in rural Wisconsin from 1953-1973. He addressed the issue of school reorganization, noting that one critical part of the plan was to publicize it adequately so that the public would be kept informed and involved in the progress of school reorganization in each district. Significantly more positive attitudes were noted toward the "sufficiency of publicity on the reorganization plan". He commented that the "completeness and orderly manner in which school reorganization proceeded in Wisconsin can partly be attested to by the results of these data. A potentially explosive educational issue was transformed into an orderly social change during the '50s and '60s" (p. 19).

Reporting on the community relations program in the CAL Community School, Latimer, Iowa, Jess (1981) noted that the school had overcome obstacles in developing its programs--the district maintained a preschool and an adult education program, as well as varied extracurricular activities--and continued to exist because of such community relations efforts as mailing weekly newsletters to all householders in the district and using surveys to assess community attitudes toward the school.

A study of schools in two neighboring rural Kentucky counties sought to determine the effect of differing school organizational patterns on school functioning and how community-school relations in both counties had been affected by organizational differences (Kay, 1981). West County's independent system maintained excellent relations with its community, the study showed, but both West and East Countys' consolidated

schools generally lacked strong community ties, except at the elementary level.

In some rural areas, a community relations program is not just a "plus" for the school system--it is necessary for the very survival of school personnel. Such, according to Cline (1974), was the situation for teachers in the Alaskan Bush. Identification with the factional groups in Alaskan villages is mandatory, he said. He commented that "if a positive relationship with some villagers has not developed, most teachers will seek a transfer to leave the bush altogether" (p. 102).

It is clear from this look at what's been done that community relations programs can assist small school districts in accomplishing their goals and objectives. While public relations principles practiced in business and industry for decades have already been adapted by many urban and suburban school districts, they have been slow in coming to rural school districts.

The next chapter will discuss the standards that should be incorporated in a school-community relations program for small, rural schools.

Through research, standards that should go into a school-community relations plan for small, rural school districts have been developed. The following 10 criteria have been determined to be the most important criteria for a small school district program.

1. An Evaluation Component

Often, goals are set and plans are made, but no means are developed to monitor the success of those goals or plans. A good program should have the means to determine if the plan is accomplishing its goals. The evaluation component is particularly critical when trying to determine future goals.

Evaluation can be accomplished both formally and informally. Survey tools can be used to monitor community attitudes. Pre- and post-surveys would be particularly useful. In rural areas, however, such formalized evaluation tools are often counter-productive. Informal evaluation gained through community meetings, telephone surveys and other means, might be even more effective.

2. Someone Delegated with Specific Responsibility for the Program

If no one is in charge, nothing gets done. Someone should be in charge of the school-

community relations program so that something gets done.

In a small, rural district, the superintendent is often the best person to take charge of the program. Granted, the superintendent may not have any district assistance nor any building-level assistance. However, the time it takes to react to the results of poor community relations will probably be greater than the time it takes to execute a solid school-community relations program.

If the superintendent elects not to take charge of the program, the task could be delegated to a principal or perhaps even an active community volunteer. However, if someone other than the chief administrator is in charge, that person should have assurance of school board and superintendency support for the program.

Some districts with adequate budgets have found the means to hire a part-time person to manage the school-community relations effort while reporting directly to the superintendent. This, of course, is an ideal situation that many districts do not have the resources to replicate.

3. A Good Product

A school-community relations plan is not designed to cover up bad news or bad performance. Rather, it is designed to increase understanding between the public and the school, and to build confidence. To do so, the school district must be maintaining and offering a good product: that is, a quality educational

program. The school-community relations program should not be designed to get the public to buy into an inferior educational effort. Defects in the educational program should be corrected before a massive school-community relations effort is launched.

My show business involvement taught me the difference between publicity or "press agentry" and public relations. Publicity or "press agentry" is the effort to get "stuff" in the paper--good, bad or otherwise. "I don't care what you say about me, just spell my name right," is an example of such press agentry.

Public relations reflects an ongoing effort to have the public buy into your program by offering confidence and quality offerings.

In working with school-community relations in several districts, I have found it necessary to first correct deficiencies--build the quality--before launching our public relations efforts. For example, in one district I served, the graduation requirements were such that we were not really preparing our students for all the options available to them following graduation. Before trying to convince the public about our exceptional high school offerings, it was necessary to make our high school offerings exceptional. We worked on improving the graduation requirements. Once that task was completed, we then went about the task of building confidence in our high school.

First things first. Build a quality product. Then set about selling that product to your consumer--in this case, your parents and taxpayers.

A television commercial may convince you to buy a new detergent. But if that detergent doesn't get your clothes clean, it will be the first and last time you'll buy it.

Likewise, you can develop a public relations program that might get your patrons to buy into your program. But if that program doesn't deliver, it will be the last time they'll buy into it; the credibility and community support will be lost.

4. A Program That's Planned and Systematic, Including Goals and Objectives

A shotgun approach seldom works with any endeavor. Your school-community relations effort should be organized, planned, and systematic.

Your planning should not be a one-person job. It is important that the school board, teachers, staff members and community be involved in setting the school-community relations goals.

Not all the community relations problems in your district can be solved overnight, or in 1 year, or in 5 years. Proper planning allows you to set short and long-range goals. These goals should be based on the prioritized community relations needs of your district. If your district is typical, you have many such needs.

Perhaps your district needs more volunteers. You can set a goal to increase the participation of community volunteers in your district. Perhaps there is a lack of confidence in the budgeting and spending habits of your

district. A goal could be to increase public understanding of the budget procedures in your district.

That was one of our goals in a district in which I served. There seemed to be confusion concerning the budgeting process. Our objective therefore became to increase community understanding and support of the district budgeting process. Once the objective was set, we were able to develop activities designed to accomplish that objective. Among those activities was the publication of a district annual report, including a thorough budget breakdown, complete with diagrams and pie graphs showing exactly where the district funds went and why. We also beefed up our public budget hearing to include visuals and other means to help patrons understand, and hopefully support, our budgeting procedures.

5. Research

This standard is closely related to standard 4. In order to set the goals for your program, you must determine your community relations needs. It has already been suggested that there be widespread involvement in this process.

One method of obtaining this involvement is by conducting appropriate needs assessment in your community to determine areas of misunderstanding or concern. Needs assessment can be accomplished through survey tools. Many districts have developed effective and scientifically accurate tools to accomplish this. Such assessment can also be accomplished through community meetings, small group get-togethers,

discussions with community leaders and other, more informal, means.

6. Personal Good Will

All the elaborate community relations techniques you can devise will not compensate for one snitty secretary on the phone with a parent. Personal good will is a critical attribute of a school-community relations program. It should start at the top with board members and school superintendents, and involve everyone from your bus drivers to your cooks and custodians.

What we do speaks louder than what we say. If our community relations program is designed to demonstrate that we care about what the public thinks, our personal behavior and attitudes better reflect that we care, too.

A parent reads on Tuesday night in the school district newsletter that the school district cares about her little boy: "Children are our most important concern," the newsletter proudly heralds. Then, the next morning, the bus driver picking up that child hollers, "Hurry up and get in, sit down, and shut up. Can't you see I'm running late?"

So much for your community relations. There's one family that will never be convinced.

Employee training therefore becomes an important part of your effort. Employees need training in dealing with the public. Training is often necessary in just the common courtesies of telephone and interpersonal behavior.

Leaders in a district are often unaware of how employees are acting toward the public. They must become aware. Start with your own office. How does your secretary handle difficult incoming phone calls or visits?

Your entire community relations program rests on the good will and attitudes displayed to the public each day by the individuals that work in your district.

7. Honesty

Research has shown that honesty is the most critical attribute of a good school-community relations program.

Candid and direct answers to the public are the best types of responses. We all know better than to lie to the public. It isn't what we say that causes the problems sometimes, but what we don't say. There are sins of commission and there are sins of omission. Leaving out information, and not telling the whole story, is a sin of omission that could cause serious damage to your community relations.

If you're in the habit of giving out school board meeting news, then you must include the good along with the bad or the embarrassing. Not telling the full story hurts your credibility, and could be judged as dishonesty.

When a patron asks a question, give a full and complete response. It may hurt at the time, but such a response will build long-term positive relationships.

"I understand one of our schools is in danger of losing its accreditation next year," asked a patron at the board meeting.

"That's correct," I responded, noticing the rapid notes being taken by the reporters in the room. I then went on to give the complete explanation of the situation. Sure, it created problems at the time. But it was the truth, and truth is the guts of a community relations program.

Honesty extends to the ability to admit you're wrong when you are. So many problems are created simply because of pride or our inability to stand up and say, "Indeed, I messed up. Sorry." When a mistake is made, say so in a direct and honest fashion. Any attempt at cover-up is not only dishonest, but carries the likelihood of a tremendous backfire.

Besides, your apology is difficult to argue with. It's unlikely anyone will insist you were right when you argue you were wrong. The controversy ends right there.

Honesty isn't only the best policy; it's the only policy.

8. Sound Media Relationships

It is vitally important to maintain good working relationships with the newspapers, radio stations, and television channels that cover your school district. The media has the power to shape public opinion of your school district. You should stand in awe of that power.

Develop a list of the media that cover your school district. Send out regular news releases noting the positive, good things happening in your schools. The cry is heard too often that all the newspapers print is the bad news. In defense of the media, that is usually because no one is telling them about the good news. If you don't toot your own horn, who will?

Make sure the newspapers are invited to your school events and activities. Make sure they are aware of the exciting and positive things going on in your classrooms.

Timely, well-written news stories sent to the media will help your community relations program immensely. The media should also be sent weekly calendars of school events.

Be readily available to phone calls or visits from the media. Be mindful that reporters are usually overworked and underpaid. Try to cooperate. They have deadline pressures. If they are calling you at 10 a.m., a phone call returned at 2 p.m. does them no good at all--their paper has gone to press.

There is nothing that alienates a reporter more than someone calling them back after deadline. Become familiar with the media deadlines in your town so you can avoid having this happen.

Make a friend, whenever possible, of the reporters assigned to cover your district. Such friendships will pay off in the crisis times when you seek media understanding and support.

Try not to criticize the media, if at all possible. I generally ignore most media mistakes in stories about my district. No one likes criticism--think about how much you enjoy receiving those parent complaint calls. Newspaper reporters and editors don't enjoy receiving such calls either.

If a serious error has been made, it will probably be necessary to call the media's attention to it. But if it can be overlooked, do so. It will serve you better in the long run.

Avoid any serious rift between yourself and the local press. In any battle with the press, it is the press that generally wins. After all, it's their printing press. They determine who has the last word.

9. Two-way Communications

Our school-community relations efforts are often one-way communications. We send out news releases; we put out newsletters; we send home memos to the students; and we present PTA programs.

Our school-community relations efforts need to develop means of having a two-way dialog with our community. This can be accomplished through survey forms, complaint or suggestion boxes, and other written methods.

It can also be accomplished through community meetings designed to seek public input.

One of the most successful community relations programs I have been involved with was our community meeting program, which we have initiated in several districts in which I have worked. The concept calls for inviting about a dozen patrons each month to meet in the superintendent's office to discuss matters of concern to them. No agenda is set for the meeting. The patrons bring the agenda with them with their questions.

Through such meetings, the superintendent not only gives out information, but receives information as well--an outstanding example of two-way communications.

Another method for two-way communications we developed was a "breakfast with the superintendent" program, in which junior high school and high school students, in groups of about eight, are invited on a monthly basis to breakfast with the superintendent, to discuss matters of concern to them. This two-way communication is valuable not only to the students, but to the superintendent as well. He or she receives valuable ideas and information.

10. Enthusiasm

Once again, it starts at the top, and works its way through the system. Research has shown that enthusiasm must be at the heart of a school-community relations program in order for it to succeed. One cannot reluctantly get together once a month to meet with district patrons in the evening. The superintendent must want to do it and must be excited about doing it. Otherwise, any resentment or "chip on the

shoulder" will be too apparent to parents and patrons.

An outstanding school-community relations program will have each of these 10 components.

Notable school-community relations practices extracted from studies of districts throughout the country will be discussed in the next section.

Many school districts throughout the country are employing notable school-community relations practices that provide excellent models for districts just beginning to formulate their programs. Often, these districts serve small, rural communities.

Twenty-Six Helps

A study of such districts throughout the country resulted in the following list of 26 such notable practices:

1 -- Newsletters

2 -- Policies, job descriptions and goals

3 -- Detailed administrative regulations on community relations

4 -- Priorities and priority indicators

5 -- Annual accountability report

6 -- A diversity of techniques

7 -- Two-way communications procedures

8 -- In-service training in school-community relations

9 -- Learning at Home project

10 -- Key communicator network

11 -- Weekly newsletters to board members

12 -- Attempts to define and reach various publics

13 -- Monthly citizen luncheons

14 -- Use of business marketing skills in the school

15 -- "Someone special" days

16 -- Public relations activity planning sheets

17 -- Career guidance project

18 -- Flexible parent conference scheduling

19 -- Apprenticeship program

20 -- Community discussion groups

21 -- Staff involvement in news distribution

22 -- Community-involving budget procedures

23 -- Meetings between school board and other governing boards

24 -- Educational councils involving community members

25 -- Adopt-a-school program

26 -- Short- and long-term planning procedures

These notable practices will be considered now as they are put into use throughout the country.

Ashdown, Arkansas

The Ashdown Public Schools consider their newsletter to be the heart of their public relations effort. The newsletter includes news about each of the five schools.

Ashdown also conducts regular needs assessment meetings.

The community relations effort in Ashdown is handled by the principal of two elementary schools. The district's motto is "Between Us--School and community working together toward greater excellence in education."

Texarkana, Arkansas

Texarkana School District No. 7 maintains extensive Board of Education policies on community relations. While there is no written plan for community relations, the policies can serve as such. They include a detailed job description for the information services/personnel coordinator who sets annual objectives and goals.

The district policies reflect an attitude that the community has a right to know about the schools. Activities in the Texarkana program include monthly newsletters to parents in each school; a faculty/staff newsletter published four

times a year; a 5-minute, twice-a-week radio program; a cable television program, six times a week; a 24-hour information number; a weekly written report to the board of education; a written report to all faculty and staff concerning board actions; community advisory committees; surveys; and recognition of faculty and staff members on their birthdays.

Adelanto, California

The Adelanto School District, Adelanto, California, has a school-community relations program that includes administrative regulations as well as board policies. The policies are broad and cover such areas as public participation, communications with the public, relations between schools and community, community recreation programs, disasters, and visitations and political activities.

Its public relations objectives include:

--explaining the programs, achievements and needs of the schools to parents and the community

--making every effort to foresee and avoid problems caused by misunderstanding or lack of information

--providing optimum staff performance by keeping all staff members fully informed

--operating in public session as speedily and efficiently as circumstances permit, with public participation

A policy on news media relations calls for board representatives to be readily available to media representatives, to provide media representatives with all facts, and to cooperate with feature stories.

Community representatives serve on ongoing budget and curriculum committees. Each school has a school-site council composed of parents, teachers, and principal and employee representatives. Each school has a parent-teacher organization.

Frisco, Colorado

A community goal-setting session in the Summit School District, Frisco, Colorado, determined that improved communication and public relations should be a priority for the school district.

The Summit program objectives are:

--external communications which improve community understanding of programs and services

--internal communications which improve Summit staff understanding and support

--survey research activities

--management plan activities

--communication plan activities

--management training activities to provide in-service to administrators and board members

--information activities

--liaison activities to assure positive relationships with other schools and media

--student involvement

The Summit district conducted a detailed needs assessment to determine the extent of parent involvement in its schools. The district's accountability committee, as a result of the assessment, was able to make detailed recommendations in the areas of communication, conferences, parent organizations, and school pride.

Among the recommendations for communication were:

--that newspapers be mailed regularly

--that parents be provided curriculum outlines

--that parents be notified immediately when problems occur as well as when there are positive accomplishments

--that parents be asked to share their talents in the classroom

--that parent orientations be held

--that each school appoint a public relations person

Sterling, Colorado

The Valley School District, Sterling, Colorado, does not have a person specifically delegated to its public relations program, which is managed primarily by the superintendent. While it has no written policies to guide it, its superintendent operates on a philosophy of working closely, openly, and honestly with the press. Several booklets and publications are employed in the district, including materials for new kindergarten students, special education materials, and an annual accountability report.

Among ideas used in the Valley program are citizens committees, parents and grandparents days, open houses, radio and television interviews, and press releases.

Dalton, Georgia

The school-community relations plan of the Dalton Public Schools incorporates a comprehensive public relations policy that assures commonly accepted goals. Procedures are established for sending out news releases, newsletters and other materials. The program includes a community relations job description. The program emphasizes good media relationships, and involves a broad cross-section of community persons.

Its procedures are divided into three lists of "to do" items--paper things to do, electronic things to do and people things to do. Among paper items are annual reports, board summary agenda, board wrap-up, fact sheets, handbooks, happygrams, letters, mini-minutes, newsletters, news releases, news sheets, photographs, policy

manuals and surveys. Among electronic items are information lines, radio shows, slide-tape presentations, and television. Among people items are advisory councils, in-service programs, involvement of students, a key communicators system, lunch with the boss, lunch with the superintendent, media/printer relations, a school contact person, special event promotions, speeches, and system public relations committee.

Idaho Falls, Idaho

The Idaho Falls School District has a public information officer who is employed 4.5 hours per day for 11 months, and reports directly to the superintendent. The job description calls for that person to write several press releases a week, and to write, edit and publish three publications: a bi-weekly newsgram which is a summary of local, state and national education; a monthly staff newsbrief which gives news of district employee awards, school funding and other items; and a patron newsletter, mailed to patron homes four times a year.

School district policies are maintained on school-community relations, public information, the public's right to know, community use of school facilities, public complaints and relations with community organizations.

The district maintains six goals for school-community relations:

--to develop public understanding of all aspects of school operation

--to secure adequate financial support for a sound educational program

--to help citizens feel a direct responsibility for the quality of education provided by their schools

--to earn the good will, respect and confidence of the public

--to involve citizens in the work of the schools and in the solving of educational problems

--to promote a genuine spirit of cooperation between the school and community

Lewiston, Idaho

The goals of the Lewiston School District No. 1 school-community relations plan are to increase community and employee understanding of school curricula, people, services, programs and problems, and to increase community and employee support for the school district. The plan defines its publics as parents, employees, taxpayers without children in school, students, and state (Board of Education, Department of Education, legislators).

One objective is to increase the flow of information to the public information officer through attendance at administrative councils, visiting with school employees, visiting in classrooms, and involvement in community activities. Another objective is to inform all the publics about Lewiston schools through regular contact with the news media, a calendar

of events, news releases and photos, telephone calls to reporters and photographers, a staff newsletter, community newsletters, school-community relations workshops, brochures, leaflets, handbooks and other printed information, twice yearly classified employee meetings with the superintendent, and weekly radio news programs.

An objective to increase community participation in the schools includes such strategies as community visits to classrooms, a school volunteer program, and student performances for senior citizens.

Lewiston affords a public information officer by having that person do her own secretarial work, handle all aspects of publications, use volunteers, and deal with curtailed working hours. All publications are printed in the district print shop, with folding, stapling and other work handled by volunteers.

In addition to its detailed goals and objectives, the district maintains school-community relations job descriptions.

Peoria, Illinois

The Peoria Public Schools has a board policy on school-community relations that calls for employees of the district to maintain channels of communications with its citizens at all times. Using the available media, the board communicates the information relating to the plans, programs, problems and operations of the district.

The board encourages participation on the part of the public at regular board meetings. Regular assessments are held to ascertain public attitudes about the schools and programs. The board emphasizes individual responsibility on the part of each employee in improving communications between the schools and the public.

A continuing program of in-service training is offered for employees in school-community relations.

Toulon, Illinois

The Toulon-Lafayette Community Unit, District No. 2 has set as its number one goal the improvement of its public relations and public image. This is achieved through community knowledge and improved communications concerning school activities, curriculum and special programs. The goal calls for an emphasis on better media coverage, a newsletter with a monthly calendar, a bulk mailing program, and meetings of parent-citizens groups. Several brochures are printed. The district conducts workshops for pre-school parents on things they can do at home to prepare toddlers for the day they enter school. Each participant receives a large bag of materials. The workshop is called "Learning at Home."

School facilities are made available for various community groups, at a nominal rental cost.

"Pride" is a word mentioned frequently in the Toulon program.

Fort Wayne, Indiana

The heart of the Southwest Allen County Schools, Fort Wayne, Indiana, school-community relations program is a monthly telephone survey project to assess the school community's perceptions of education-related issues. Twenty-two volunteers form a Key Communicator Network.

A random sampling of households was compiled by a computer. Each surveyor contacts 10 homes over a 9-day period. Those called are asked to respond to five questions covering a range of topics from discipline to the quality of education their children are receiving. With each survey, the sampling is changed.

Administrators, school board members, and teachers assist in generating questions for the survey. The data are used in program and policy planning. Information from the monthly survey is reported to the public at the regular board meeting and in the district's newspapers.

Rozel, Kansas

The Pawnee Heights Unified School District No. 496, Rozel, Kansas, does not maintain written documentation for its school-community relations program. However, there are several projects designed to improve school-community relations:

--regular news releases are sent

--radio stories are planned

--college extension courses are offered in the schools

--school facilities are open to the public four nights per month and one Saturday per month

--school handbooks are distributed to each family

--an educational directory is published

--a district flyer is mailed on the last Friday of each month

--a weekly update is sent to board members on Wednesday of each week

--a weekly district calendar is sent to each parent and the media

--a teacher newsletter goes to all teachers on the last day of each week.

--when a student does something outstanding, a letter is sent to the student and the parents

--community workshops are held

--the district participates in state and national organizations.

--there is a high school newspaper

--the school maintains a liaison with the local churches

Scandia, Kansas

A former business instructor who currently teaches journalism and computer education now handles the school-community relations functions for Pike Valley Unified School District No. 426, Scandia, Kansas.

On a 10-month contract, this person organizes back-to-school information, designs handbook covers, and also serves as yearbook advisor.

The Pike Valley program has four thrusts: (1) public relations on all levels; (2) public relations on the building level; (3) public relations on the district level; and (4) public relations on an individual basis.

1. Public relations on all levels: Techniques used include display of student work, newsletters, badges, switch with a parent program, photographs, logos, directories, involvement of support staff, notepads, attractive letterhead stationary, and postcards.

2. Public relations on the building level: Techniques include posting of birthdays in the lunch room, get well and birthday greetings, open houses, potluck suppers, athletic schedule cards, monthly calendar, weekly calendar, faculty and student handbooks, buddy system for new teachers and students, yearbooks loaned to new teachers, bulletin boards for students and staff, course offering booklet, honoring of perfect attendance, season tickets for athletic events, parent-teacher conferences, and school award certificates.

3. Public relations on the district level: Techniques include staff socials, handbooks, sports programs, monthly calendar, newspaper updates, availability of board information to staff, advisory councils, golden age passes, annual reports, Christmas greetings, and contact with area radio stations.

4. Public relations on an individual basis: Techniques include neat, readable communications; proud notes, happygrams, good news notes, thank you notes; phone calls home; conference checklist; and a policy of being available, being seen and being interested.

Morenci, Michigan

School-community relations techniques employed in the Morenci Area Schools include:

--birthday cards from the superintendent and his wife to all staff, including board members, administrators, teachers, and custodians

--clippings of school news cut out and sent to the persons involved, with congratulations from the superintendent

--letters sent home regarding scholarships and awards

--recognition by the board of education of students or staff who excel

--a regular newspaper column on little known facts about the school

--a monthly luncheon with 5 to 10 citizens that includes a tour and question-answer session

--flowers sent to the immediate family at times of staff births or deaths

Mt. Clemens, Michigan

The Macomb Intermediate School District, Mt. Clemens, Michigan, has developed a nationally recognized marketing program designed to first improve the institution, and then to market it. The Macomb marketing plan includes a "marketing planner" kit that helps the district identify strengths and weaknesses, and set goals. The purpose of the Macomb plan is "to let people know that public education has done and is doing good things," according to plan documents. The plan alerts educators to changes in the educational marketplace, monitors what people do and don't like about their schools, and helps educators respond to the needs of their clients.

Phase One is targeted at elementary parents, and is focused on basic learning skills. The objective is to show people public schools provide a better basic education than ever before, and to help youngsters develop from that solid educational foundation. Phase Two is targeted at secondary students and their parents. Phase Three is targeted at those without children in the schools. This program stresses the importance of education, and attempts to address the personal educational needs of adults.

The plan includes training sessions and product development. The plan has been based on survey research findings and is targeted to specific consumer needs.

Among ideas incorporated in the plan are bookmarkers; the Helping Kids Learn Fair; Friday envelopes--large envelopes designed to send home classroom materials for the weekend; welcome posters; tee-shirt transfers; note pads and pencils; self-help records to help students at home; parent conference planners; refrigerator magnets; newsletters; camera graphics; bumper stickers; student leadership groups; adult education directors; and communications with legislators.

Bellevue, Nebraska

The first element in the Bellevue Public Schools, Bellevue, Nebraska, school-community relations plan is the identification of its publics. It has identified its publics as parents, senior citizens, businessmen, Offutt Air Force Base officials, students, and staff. A major focus of late has been senior citizens.

The theme of its program is: "Bellevue Public Schools: We're Proud!"

The program includes many publications such as orientation brochures, teacher recruitment brochures, PTA bulletins, teacher and staff bulletins, and calendars.

Other techniques employed include visibility of board of education members; passes for seniors; "someone special day" during which one or two students in a class bring an adult

friend to spend an hour or two in class; parent visitation day; invitations to civic organizations to have lunch at the school; invitations to ministers to participate in school-community group meetings; personalized letters to parents of graduating students given with the student's diploma; training of classified staff members; training for substitutes; bus driver day; food service day; secretary day; teacher appreciation day; key communicators committee; superintendent's visitation to schools; education week; birthday cards to staff members; breakfasts with the superintendent; and making materials available to the students to work on in the summer.

Omaha, Nebraska

The Millard Public Schools, Omaha, Nebraska school-community relations plan has two major objectives: (1) to keep residents of the district informed, through all possible channels, of policies, goals, programs, activities and problems of the school system; and (2) to foster an effective system of internal communications between central office and individual buildings--and among the various buildings--and to make each employee aware of his/her public relations responsibilities.

Under the first objective, district-level activities include monthly newsletter; annual school calendar; brochure on specific programs and procedures; handbooks; slide/tape presentations; news media relations; strategies to meet the needs of specific situations; anticipation of effect of national stories on local media; special information campaigns; and advisory committees.

Building-level activities under the first objective include newsletters, handbooks, open houses, parent/teacher conferences, home visits, parent visits to school, phone calls to parents, parent coffees in school and homes, special student programs, volunteer programs, parent seminars, parent-teacher organizations, happiness notes, upslips, and letters.

Under the second objective, activities include newsletters, memos, handbooks, in-service programs, advisory committees, orientation for new teachers, and workshops.

Each activity is detailed on a public relations activity planning sheet that defines the activity; targets the publics, purposes, and procedures; and specifies who does what and when. Also, a public relations planning calendar is maintained.

Brookline, New Hampshire

A district goal of Brookline/Hollis School Districts, Brookline, New Hampshire, calls for the school district to actively use public relations for the benefit of the school district. Objectives listed under this goal include the implementation of articles and/or activities that focus on positive events and the accomplishments of students and staff; and the exploration of expanded use of facilities by the community.

Building administrators have school-community relations listed as a major part of their job descriptions. It calls for them to develop and sustain, in conjunction with the superintendent, a program of public relations

aimed at interpreting the school's role to the community.

Nashua, New Hampshire

The Nashua School District's program is marked by a myriad of publications, including a fact sheet, a welcome brochure for new families, a community and business resource manual, newsletters, calendars, and school handbooks.

The district maintains an elaborate career guidance project for its community. Its goal is to improve the delivery of career guidance in its community by encouraging collaboration among private and public sector organizations. The district also maintains a speakers' bureau.

Periodic information meetings with realtors and personnel meetings are held by the district. The meetings provide important information to the two groups and the district is also provided with feedback regarding the community's attitudes toward the schools.

On a 2-week rotating basis, each school exhibits its students' art work in the administrative offices, and letters are sent by the superintendent to the parents of the exhibitors inviting them to view the displays.

Sixteen vocational committees are maintained, with a total of 170 community members. In addition to advising on such matters as curriculum and equipment, the committees also sponsor a variety of activities such as career days.

Through a university's community/school coordinator training project, a volunteer coordinator spent 2 years in Nashua initiating a linking among the school system, the community, local business and industry. The coordinator is now being continued in a paid capacity through federal funding.

Rye, New Hampshire

Non-parents make up 75 percent of the population in School Administrative Unit No. 50, Rye, New Hampshire. Therefore, many programs are geared toward this public.

A quarterly newsletter is published covering news and activities throughout the district. Extensive use is made of the local newspapers, both at a district and a building level.

Adjustments have been made in parent conference schedules to allow for greater participation; conferences are held during an evening and the following morning.

Winchester, New Hampshire

One of the key elements of the Winchester School District school-community relations plan is the Thayer High School Apprenticeship Program, which has 75 apprentices working in the community in a variety of vocational areas.

The district also maintains a key communicators group, including persons representing various neighborhoods who meet monthly with the principal and other school

staff to provide a two-way communication flow between neighborhoods and schools.

Publications include "Learning Together," which has detailed descriptions of district programs, including course outlines and disciplinary systems, and SHARE, a high school newsletter.

A process to get parents to conferences and make the conferences meaningful is maintained, as well as a process to involve community members in curriculum development. Neighborhood coffees are held. The district manages a community service program to link students with programs for the needy.

The district describes itself as a "poor, rural community," and therefore values the involvement of the community to enrich its programs.

Colts Neck, New Jersey

The Colts Neck Township Schools rely heavily on community discussion groups in its school-community relations plan. Started as an experiment in 1971, a home/school discussion group consists of nine lay persons (six selected by the PTA and three selected by building principals), a board member, three classroom teachers (one from each school), the three principals, and the superintendent. The purpose of the group--which meets once a month during the school year--is to conduct open discussions about the school.

Smithville, New Jersey

Publications are the heart of the Galloway Township Public Schools, Smithville, New Jersey, school-community relations program. The Galloway Times, a community-wide newsletter, is mailed to every resident. Individual school brochures describe building programs. Each month a principals' newsletter is published, with each district principal contributing. A parent information guide is forwarded to each parent on an annual basis prior to the beginning of school.

There are other elements to the Galloway program. Staff members, divided into units of three or four, are required five times yearly to prepare and distribute unit newsletters to parents that emphasize upcoming programs and show how the parents can participate in their child's instruction. There are periodic news releases to the media. "Good news" letters are sent by the teachers to parents. Pre-conferences are held in September, immediately after school starts, so parents can meet with the child's teachers. There is an active volunteer program, with more than 200 persons participating. The district maintains a complete community education program.

A bookmark noting dates and times of board meetings and school holidays is distributed. The school makes book covers. The superintendent does a weekly radio show. Regular communications are sent to the mayor and city council. Board highlights are sent to the staff the day following the board meeting so that they know what took place the previous night.

Margaretville, New York

Over the years the Margaretville Central school, Margaretville, New York, has had considerable opposition to the annual school budget. Much of its school-community relations plan has been aimed at reducing this negativism. While there is no board policy concerning school-community relations, there is a board-approved administrative procedure relating to the development of the annual school budget.

Various community organizations are invited to send one representative to meetings for budget development. Community organizations are contacted. Through a series of five to six meetings, the budget is reviewed line by line before these groups, with specific school personnel brought in to explain requests for special expenditures. At the conclusion of the meetings, the committee is requested to issue a public statement supporting the proposed expenditures.

Throughout the budget development stages, the committee recommendations are passed on to the board. The superintendent acts as chairperson of the meetings. Once the meetings are concluded, committee members are charged with the responsibility of informing their organizations regarding the proposed school budget.

In 1978, a tax levy vote was 267 yes, 260 no. In 1982, the vote was 104 yes, 9 no.

Oxford, New York

From 1972 to 1976, Oxford Academy and Central Schools, Oxford, New York, had a planning grant which provided federal funds for "The Oxford Attempt," a coordinated effort to improve community involvement in the schools.

While the federal dollars flowed, the district had a director who was charged with developing and maintaining community and school involvement. At its apex, the Oxford Attempt had four citizen/school committees, produced a list of community resource people available to the schools, produced a monthly newsletter, provided a speakers' bureau, and established the "tri-board" concept; three times a year the Board of Education, Town Board and Village Board met to discuss common problems, and continually sought new ways for more involvement in the schools through volunteer programs and open lines of communication.

When the dollars left, so did the formal program. What Oxford has left are parts of the program that are managed without a director. These include: the "tri-board" concept; volunteers in the schools; a board philosophy of openness; ad hoc committees made up of staff and community representatives for energy bond issues, budget votes, curriculum studies, and facilities planning and use; and a monthly newsletter.

Ada, Ohio

Ada Exempted Village Schools has a school-community relations program that includes an annual progress report, a supplement to the

local newspaper on an annual basis, a community newsletter, a brochure on psychological services available, letters to every new family enrolling in school, and an educational council.

The educational council consists of two representatives from each voting precinct in the school district, and one representative each from the student council, Ada Education Association, and Ada Classified Employees.

The purposes of the council are to help better communications and increase understanding between the school and community, and to act in an advisory capacity to the superintendent. Meetings are held every other month throughout the school year to discuss operation, curriculum, policy, or concerns of the community regarding the school district.

Piqua, Ohio

Among ideas used in the Piqua City Schools is its adopt-a-school program, in which business, industry, civic, social and professional organizations sponsor a school for any one of a number of purposes--student tutoring, financial resources, specialized projects, school resource persons, cultural experiences, student in-service, maintenance, incentives and awards, or staff development.

Piqua publishes a map of its district, along with district personnel and board phone numbers. The superintendent sends Christmas cards and birthday cards. A comprehensive annual report to the board is prepared by the superintendent. The board is also given a date

and topic index for all meetings throughout the year. Lunch menus are published.

There are community newsletters, "hats off" awards, an info-phone for parents on inclement weather days, "tip sheets" for new employees, a school volunteer program, timely board meeting bulletins, special weeks honoring various categories of district employees, and distribution of cards to the superintendent to question details of rumors or to relate ideas.

Smethport, Pennsylvania

Smethport Area School District is comprised of one town and four townships covering an area of 350 square miles. It is equidistant from three newspapers, none of which covers the entire district. Five different radio stations cover the district, requiring the school to notify each about emergency school closings.

The geographical problems of the district resulted in a communication problem, causing the district to begin sending a newsletter through the mail to all homes in the district. The newsletters are mailed prior to board meetings each month.

Sandy, Utah

The coordinator of public information in Jordan School District, Sandy, Utah, reports directly to the administrator of student and community services. The coordinator is responsible for the production of official district communications to the news media, school community, employees and the general public.

Among the coordinator's functional responsibilities are to:

--disseminate factual information through verbal, visual, and printed communications to the news media, school community, employees and general public

--prepare press releases, newsletters, reports and other material for the purpose of interpreting the district's educational programs, plans, activities, accomplishments, problems, concerns, needs and policies

--respond to communication requests from the Board of Education, superintendent, district administrators and news media

--provide in-service training and consultation services to staff members on matters related to public information

--ensure that operations and activities of the public information department comply with district and Board of Education goals, and that policies and guidelines are in keeping with good management and accountability practices

--develop and implement short- and long-range planning procedures which include training, accountability, management and evaluation of public information operations

District school-community relations goals are to:

--disseminate honest, faculty information on matters of general interest relating to schools

--to conduct programs which generate positive public support for school programs, positions and policies

--build a positive image for the district

--determine and respond to public opinion

--continually evaluate the public relations effort and make modifications as necessary to meet school or public needs

What We Are Doing in Shelley, Idaho

Shelley Joint School District No. 60 is the third district in which I have had the opportunity to initiate a school-community relations plan.

We have been fortunate in Shelley--some of our programs have been nationally recognized. We recently received two National School Public Relations Association Golden Achievement awards. One award was for our program of community meetings/student breakfasts/faculty forums. The other award was for our monthly district newsletter.

The purpose of the community meetings/student breakfasts/faculty forums project is to increase face-to-face communication between the district and its patrons, parents, faculty and staff members.

Although we were doing a lot in school communications with print media, we determined there was a need for face-to-face personal communication. Many small-town patrons are not comfortable with communications other than face-to-face communication. We therefore designed three projects to try to speak to our patrons and receive feedback from them.

We defined three segments of communication that we felt required face-to-face communication: communication with patrons, communication with students, and communication with faculty and staff. We felt that the communication had to be directly from top-level administration to the targeted audiences. The planning began at the board level in discussion of the problem. The matter was then referred to the superintendent. The superintendent then involved patrons, students and staff members in a special task force to develop a solution.

The project's three subdivisions are monthly superintendent community meetings with patrons, monthly superintendent meetings with students, and monthly faculty and staff forums.

The local Parent-Teacher-Student Organization each month invites approximately 10 to 12 patrons to the superintendent's office. The superintendent meets with patrons in open, roundtable discussion on matters of concern to them. There is no formal agenda for the meeting; the patrons bring the agenda with them through their questions and concerns. These meetings, designed to last 1 hour, often last 3 to 4 hours by the patrons' choice. Refreshments are served.

The superintendent invites, at district expense, a group of 8 to 10 junior high school or high school students to breakfast on a Saturday morning to improve communications and discuss matters of concern to the students.

The superintendent holds a monthly faculty forum at each of the school buildings on a building rotation basis. Any faculty or staff member can attend the faculty forum.

The district newsletter was begun to improve communications between patrons and the school district by disseminating information concerning programs and activities in the school.

Although the district was active in disseminating news releases concerning the school district and communicating in other ways, we determined a need for detailed information concerning specific curriculum and other program activities in the schools. Through analysis, we determined that parents desired to have specific information about programs and program development that local media simply did not have the time or staff to cover.

The need was expressed at the board level by patrons. The board referred the matter to the superintendent, who, through cooperation with the Parent-Teacher-Student Organization, developed the concept of a monthly district newsletter.

Goals and objectives for the newsletter were determined. It was decided that a quality, comprehensive product should be produced. To keep costs of the project down, the PTSO

volunteered time and labor on the project--even to the point of actually setting type at the local newspaper type shop.

The project is handled personally by the superintendent and a PTSO member assigned to the project. Many community members are involved in writing for the newsletter and taking pictures. Editorial decisions, layout and other functions are handled in the superintendent's office with the assistance of the PTSO. The local newspaper has been cooperative in assisting with the project.

The newsletter is delivered monthly to every patron in the school district, both parents and non-parents.

As part of Shelley's school-community relations program, we also began a "Quest for Excellence." This is a goal-setting program involving all facets of our community including parents, non-parents, teachers, students, and staff members. As part of the program, staff and patrons determine goals they can set for themselves to help the district on its quest for excellence. The goal-setter meets personally with the superintendent to discuss the goal. The superintendent follows up the meeting with a letter.

Goals are in such areas as curriculum; standards, expectations and requirements; instructional content and process; quality of performance; community support; using available resources; and self-responsibility.

The district maintains an extensive community education program.

To help staff members obtain needed professional growth, the superintendent teaches graduate-level credit classes in the community for faculty and staff members, and any other interested persons. The classes are in such subjects as Computers in Education, Writing for Fun and Profit, and the Power of Teaching with New Techniques. The availability of such classes saves faculty and others from considerable travel expense as well as demands on their time.

To improve my credibility, another project I have assumed is substituting occasionally in the schools. This gives me more familiarity with the day-to-day problems of the buildings, and also builds my credibility in the community as I discuss student problems with parents.

Other projects in Shelley include:

--jellybeans on my desk to bring a smile to parents' faces when they come in to complain

--regular news releases

--letters to follow up on phone calls and visits

--weekly administrative council meetings that include our principals

--television and radio interviews

--board meeting summaries to all faculty and staff members

--regular luncheons with the business community

--daily visitations to the schools

--birthday cards to every student and employee each year

--the publication of weekly and monthly calendars

--a program to invite parents to come to school and have lunch with their child

--lunch menus in the local newspaper

--maintenance of a community leaders list to keep business leaders informed of school activities;

--the sending of special memos, and making of phone calls to board members between board meetings to keep them posted on what is taking place, including school suspensions and other matters

--invitations to the public to attend in-service programs

The respect our district receives from the business community improved with one simple directive. The request that students be encouraged to buy merchandise from community merchants whenever possible, instead of going outside the district for their needs. The merchants had expressed concern that they were very frequently approached by students to donate money to a myriad of causes; yet, when purchases needed to be made, the students went elsewhere. Since the directive went out, the students have been responsive and the merchants have been most supportive of the school.

In another district, I had concern expressed by the board that the board meetings frequently took on a negative tone. In effect, I was being told that the board was hearing all the bad news, and little of the good. We developed an idea I have since instituted in other districts in which I have worked; "Spotlight" items were placed on the board agenda. These items are designed to be informational reports, presented by teachers or students, on some aspect of our school's programs. They are designed to be enthusiastic, positive reports on what is going on in our schools.

To kick off the school year each year, I visit each classroom personally on the first day of school and present each teacher and staff member a boutonniere or corsage to welcome them back to school.

And on the day before Christmas vacation, the superintendent dresses up like Santa Claus--his secretary is Santa's helper--and delivers the district's Christmas present (last year it was hams) to employees at their work site.

How do you get started? Can all these practices be put together in a school-community relations plan for your district?

A model plan is presented in the next section.

Here is a model plan you can use to help initiate many of the ideas that have been discussed in this book.

Development of Policies and Regulations

A school-community relations plan for a small, rural school district should start with board policy demonstrating the district's commitment to such a plan, to justify the time and any expense that might be involved (Di Benedetto & Wilson, 1982; Cannedy, 1982).

A sample policy, prepared by the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association, includes the following:

--The board believes that an effective communications program is a necessary component of a school system's organization and operation. Therefore, the board supports the means necessary for its organization, maintenance, and operation

--A school system's communications program should: encourage a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the school system; be a planned, systematic, two-way process between the board and the superintendent

and their internal and external constituencies; use a variety of media including meetings, letters, circulars, seminars, publications and personal contacts; provide the channels necessary for resolving grievances and eliminating misunderstandings; and inform concerned persons as to their rights, privileges and responsibilities

--A school's communications program should: encourage informal, as well as formal, methods of communication; use a variety of media including meetings, seminars, bulletin boards, publications and personal contacts; provide channels for resolving grievances and/or misunderstandings for students, staff and community members; inform concerned persons as to their rights, privileges and responsibilities; and supplement and support the general communications program of the school system

--The board delegates to the superintendent the development of a communications program in accordance with the above principles and suggestions

These board policies should be supplemented with specific administrative regulations delegating specific job assignments and tasks. There should be someone, such as the superintendent in a small school, delegated at the district level. If there are several buildings in the district, then someone should serve as liaison for the school-community relations effort in each building. This liaison

could be an administrator, teacher or volunteer from the community.

Research

Once board policies and administrative regulations are in place, and persons delegated to the program, research should be conducted to determine the specific goals and objectives of the program (Bradberry, 1980; Canfield, 1968). This will most likely be in the form of a community needs assessment to determine current strong and weak areas in the school's community relations. The purpose is to determine which problems need solving.

This needs assessment can be accomplished through a written survey or through a phone survey. Perhaps community group meetings or coffee klatches could be used to assess community feeling on school-community relations.

In rural areas there is often prevalent thinking that formal research and needs assessment are not necessary since everyone has frequent contact with the school. However, contact does not necessarily mean communication.

Those conducting the research should attempt to: (1) identify people who have things to say about a variety of issues; (2) select a sufficiently representative sample of these people to provide a useful impression of attitudes on various topics; (3) construct a survey that will deliver practical information for short- and long-range planning; and (4) organize a continuous program of survey feedback that can be implemented inexpensively and

effectively at both the district and individual school-building level.

One survey should not be expected to accomplish too many things. The survey is one of many effective tools for soliciting community opinions about school issues, but it can create confusion and give conflicting information if not carefully focused. A short, targeted survey is the most effective.

Correct Deficiencies First

The research on this point is very clear--most public relations specialists feel a school-community relations program cannot succeed unless it is representing a good product (Bangert, 1982; NSPRA, 1980). Therefore, any deficiencies in the product must be corrected before the school-community relations program can achieve its greatest success. The purpose of the program is not to try to sell an inferior product, but to communicate information about a good product. If the needs assessment turns up deficiencies, these should be reported to the proper authorities for appropriate goal and objective setting which should be carried out independently of the school-community relations program.

Schools must meet the educational needs of people in a fast-changing world. An excellent product is basic--it is the very foundation of the schools. What is taught and how well it is taught will have a profound effect on how people feel about the schools in the community. Staff should welcome information that helps them understand how well students are actually learning.

As a basic foundation of a school-community relations program, educators should be committed to: helping every student succeed to the limits of his or her ability; planning for each school day and the school year, and then following the plan; making sure students spend enough time on the right tasks; developing high, yet realistic expectations for students; studying developments in learning theory and applying what is learned in the classroom to assure that students are mastering needed knowledge and skills; and working toward a solution when parents, students or others express a concern or present a problem.

Set Goals and Objectives

The next step is to set goals and objectives for the program (Dahlinger, 1982; Simon, 1980). Small schools most especially need to recognize that all needs cannot be solved in any given year. There must be a prioritizing of goals and objectives so that the ultimate program can be managed by a small staff and community.

Goals and objectives should be divided into two major groupings: internal, aimed at those that work within the school system; and external, aimed at those that are in the community but not within the school system. Within each of those areas, the goals and objectives should address short-term as well as long-range projects.

The goals need not be lengthy or elaborate. There may be many specific tasks, but the goal statements might very well be as concise as the following four statements:

--Obtain comprehensive, accurate and fair coverage of school activities

--Provide employees with timely and accurate information

--Provide citizens with accurate and timely information

--Assist the general superintendent and board of education in their efforts to communicate with employees and other citizens

Honesty

Research has shown honesty to be a priority in school-community relations programs (Marx, 1982; Spillman, 1982). There is no place in the school-community relations program for non-truths, for selective information-giving, or for leaving controversial issues out of the school's information program. Such practices reduce the credibility of the program and undermine its success.

Internal Relationships

Considerable effort in school-community relations in a rural community can be wasted because one or two staff members are saying derogatory things about the school. Since those that work in the schools are considered the most reliable source of information about their schools, it behooves the school-community relations program to constantly address internal communications (Holloran, 1982; NSPRA, 1980).

The internal communications system should have built into it opportunity for two-way communications with such internal publics as school board members; administrators and supervisors; counselors; librarians and library aides; teachers, substitute teachers and interns; school psychologists; nurses; secretaries and clerical aides; custodians; cafeteria personnel and bus drivers.

Internal relationships become quite critical, in a small, rural school district, since employees have daily contact with the community at the grocery store or at the football game. Staff members should be able to take pride in their school, but they cannot do so if they do not have full information about the school.

Staff members should never be placed in the position of learning from someone else what is going on in their school. One excellent communications technique is to let staff members know immediately what took place in a board meeting by distributing a special newsletter or holding a special faculty and staff meeting. This is a good way to squelch rumors that follow board meetings and it prepares staff members for encounters in the grocery store.

Other successful internal communications techniques include daily building bulletins, regular rap sessions, comprehensive teacher handbooks, frequent (in some cases, weekly) faculty meetings, and a friendly, supportive administrative attitude.

Staff involvement in news distribution is another successful technique derived from the

study of school-community relations programs. Staff members can feel a sense of ownership in the school district when they are sought out for news and can have an opportunity to see their own programs publicized.

Weekly newsletters to board members are another successful internal technique. This technique keeps board members informed, and again helps counteract rumors.

"Someone special" days can be successful, such as "teacher appreciation day," "bus driver appreciation day," etc.

Other internal communications strategies include involving employees in setting goals, reviewing and revising employment practices, providing opportunities to hear staff concerns, and planning for crisis through use of key staff communicators to dispel rumors.

External Relationships

Once internal relationships are secure, effort can be given to those external relationships with parents, non-parent taxpayers, media and others that shape the ultimate effectiveness of the school. Again, built-in opportunity for two-way communications is essential (Campbell, 1954).

Research shows that notable practices of small, rural schools in building external relationships include newsletters, annual accountability reports, learning at home projects, key communicator networks, monthly citizen lunches, career guidance projects, flexible parent conference scheduling,

apprenticeship programs, community discussion groups, budget procedures which involve the community, meetings between school board and other governing boards, educational councils involving community members, and adopt-a-school programs.

Other effective external communications practices include regular news releases, distribution of student handbooks to all community members, positive notes home, positive home visits by teachers and administrators, visibility of administrators, well-organized board meetings, use of community resources, community education programs, senior citizens programs, community work days, and community involvement in curriculum development and change (Lowrey, 1982).

A special attempt should be made to involve all of the district's publics including the business community, real estate persons, religious institutions, senior citizens, community organizations, government agencies, other educational institutions, and youth groups.

Special campaigns may be desired for specific issues, such as elections (millage, special levy or bond referendums, tax increases), wars on vandalism or drug abuse, promotion of special programs, recruitment of students, staff and parents, or public awareness of school strengths.

Media Relationships

In a small, rural school district, the maintenance of media relationships--whether with

the local weekly paper or a nearby television station--is critical (Canfield, 1968; Dodds, 1982). Because it is usually quite easy to have school material published in a small, rural paper, the school should embark on a program of regular news dissemination to the newspaper. The person responsible for the school-community relations program should become familiar with the news deadlines for the local papers, and make sure releases meet those deadlines. The media in small school districts are generally "pro-school." Well-written news releases will often be printed verbatim.

Districts should be aware of all the newspapers their community members read. Newspaper coverage areas often overlap. News should be provided to all these areas. Superintendents should get to know the local publishers well. Occasional hand-delivered news releases can help build a relationship.

News releases do not have to concern themselves with just "news." Information on routine occurrences may be welcome, if they deal with such matters as enrollment trends, transportation programs, student health programs, music and art education, science, ways parents can help their child learn, special education programs, pre-school programs, grade reporting, vocational programs, reading programs, student honors and achievements, testing programs, community use of schools, finance information dealing with local/state/federal monies, rising energy costs, or sports and drama.

The stories should be well-written, and follow standard news story formats. It is

suggested that those writing the releases obtain a journalism text as a guide.

Small papers welcome sharp black and white photos.

Personal Good Will and Enthusiasm

One interesting aspect of research performed in the area of school-community relations programs is that it isolated two intangibles as important standards for a small, rural school district public relations program--personal good will and enthusiasm. Perhaps this is because what each person does in a small community, and how the person feels, indelibly affects how well the school runs and how the community feels about the school (Knox, 1983; NSPRA, 1980).

The administrator in charge of the school-community relations program must therefore encourage personal good will on the part of all of the employees. Training should be provided--even in a small district--in the proper manner of greeting visitors personally, and in telephone etiquette. Employee needs should be met so that they can feel good about the school, and emanate that feeling.

Enthusiasm is contagious. It must begin at the top--with the superintendent--and be allowed to spread. Excitement about the school, and about the work to be performed, should be freely shared by all involved in the work.

Evaluation

The final stage in the small, rural school-community relations effort should be evaluation to determine the success of the program, and to assist in planning for future school-community relations efforts (Banach, 1982; Cutlip & Center, 1964).

Resources may be limited for evaluation efforts. Some districts may therefore choose to evaluate informally. Passage of tax levies gives feedback, as do thank you cards or positive phone calls. Friendly comments to staff members by community members in stores and on the street can give feedback.

Verbal feedback at parent conferences can be an important source of evaluative information. If time and resources permit, more formal evaluative techniques may be desired. Surveys addressing specific aspects of the community relations program might be appropriate. Community coffees to assess the program might be effective. Logs of phone calls or visits to the school, and the nature of the discussion, could give an administrator a determination of community attitudes.

Evaluation is a critical aspect of the school-community relations program of a small, rural school district.

A Plan Outline

The following could serve as a short outline for a small, rural school district school-community relations plan:

1 -- Develop board policies and regulations.

2 -- Do research to determine specific goals and objectives. Do needs assessment to determine what problems need solving.

3 -- Correct existing deficiencies.

4 -- Set goals and objectives.
   (a) Internal goals and objectives.
   (b) External goals and objectives.

5 -- Give honesty priority.

6 -- Give personal good will and enthusiasm a priority.

7 -- Plan the actual program, including:
   (a) Daily, ongoing activities.
   (b) Special planned projects, events and activities.
   (c) The various audiences at which the program will be aimed.
   (d) The timeline for handling the above.

8 -- Plan the methods of communications that will be used--print media, other media, advertising, etc.

9 -- Execute the program.

10 -- Measure and evaluate the success of the program.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this book has been to develop a model plan for school-community relations for small, rural school districts. The proposed plan has been scaled to the level of small, rural school districts. It is recommended that districts in this category consider their school-community relations needs and review the model plan for possible assistance.

The model plan has been based on 10 standards that should be a part of a school-community relations plan for small, rural school districts: an evaluation component; someone delegated with specific responsibility for the program; a good product; a program that's planned and systematic, including goals and objectives; research; personal good will; honesty; sound media relationships; two-way communications; and enthusiasm.

School districts using the model plan may also be able to incorporate the 26 school-community relations helps listed herein, including newsletters; policies, job descriptions and goals; detailed administrative regulations on community relations; priorities and priority indicators; annual accountability reports; a diversity of techniques; two-way communications procedures; in-service training in school-community relations; Learning at Home project; key communicator network; weekly newsletters

to board members; attempts to define and reach various publics; and monthly citizen luncheons.

Other school-community relations strategies include use of business marketing skills in the school; "someone special" days; public relations activity planning sheets; career guidance projects; flexible parent conference scheduling; apprenticeship programs; community discussion groups; staff involvement in news distribution; community-involving budget procedures; meetings between school board and other governing boards; educational councils involving community members; adopt-a-school programs; and short- and long-term planning procedures.

The 10 standards, and sample ideas, can be used in the model plan that calls for developing policies and regulations, research, correcting of deficiencies first, setting goals and objectives, honesty, developing positive internal and external relationships, maintaining media relationships, emphasizing personal good will and enthusiasm, and evaluation.

Even though small, rural districts are limited in time, personnel, and financial resources, such school districts can--and need to--provide full-scale school-community relations efforts. Community relations should remain a high priority in small school districts.

Small, rural school districts using this model plan are advised that its success comes, not through a widely heralded implementation of a new program that is announced as such, but through the carefully planned implementation of

these ideas into the day-to-day operation of the district.

A sound school-community relations program becomes more than a frill when one considers the amount of time it takes to calm down parents who can't understand why their child has to be on the bus 75 minutes, or to fight off a group of 50 angry citizens filibustering the school board meeting.

A scound school-community relations program is a necessity and an investment in the educational security of your community.

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